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IMAGINATION IN NON-REPRESENTATIONAL PAINTING

Andreas Elpidorou

> I do not believe I understand the American 'expressionists' so very well. Many of these paintings … I feel I do not understand at all. Often they look to me like silly smudges. And if a painting looks like a silly smudge, it is safe to conclude that you do not understand it.
>
> (Jewell 1936; cited in Breslin 1998: 582)

Introduction

Sartre, to be sure, offers us no complete theory of art. For instance, one finds in his writings no set of criteria by which one can demarcate works of art from ordinary, everyday objects. Even though one can speculate about the ontology of the work of art, and perhaps do so in an informed manner, the ontology of the work of art does not seem to have been one of Sartre's priorities. Rather, his contribution to aesthetics lies elsewhere: namely, in his descriptive account of aesthetic experience. To be precise, his contribution is twofold. It is the account itself – the details of his description – but also the themes which unfold in it: freedom, situation, but above all, imagination.

The crux of Sartre's views on painting can be summarized with ease. The object of aesthetic appreciation, he declares, is not the set of material elements of the painting. It is, rather, the irreal content which consciousness forms once the materiality of the work of art is animated by an imagining consciousness. In a word, the awareness of the object of aesthetic appreciation is not perceptual but imaginative. But the ease by which we can summarize the main tenets of Sartre's position should not lead us to believe that Sartre's position is trivial. The truth is very much the opposite. Sartre's views on art are shaped by his phenomenological account of imagination, and the latter is a study of both great complexity and philosophical importance. In it, Sartre undertakes tasks that are perhaps too numerous to be listed here. *Inter alia*, he explicates the structure of imagination; elucidates what

takes place when one looks at a painting, photograph, or a caricature and articulates what occurs when one watches a play or an impersonator; shows how imagination is both non-pictorial and distinct from perception; explains imagination's relation to freedom; clarifies the role of belief and feeling in imagination; speaks of pathologies and their relationship to imagination; and, as already announced, explains the role of imagination in aesthetics.

The aim of the essay is to demonstrate that Sartre's descriptive account of aesthetic experience can engage in a meaningful and fruitful conversation with non-representational painting. More specifically, it aims to show that the Sartrean account can bring forth and explain characteristics of non-representational paintings without either reducing or transforming them into works of art which are more adequately classified as belonging to different art movements.

The link between imagination and aesthetics determines the course of this essay, for only in the aftermath of an examination of imagination can one speak of Sartre's views on painting. The structure of the essay is as follows. The second section illustrates why, according to Sartre, imagination is both non-pictorial and distinct from perception. The third is devoted to an examination of painting and focuses primarily on three themes: the role of the canvas, the nature of the aesthetic object, and the relationship between the two. The fourth section, by using the late works of Mark Rothko as an example, demonstrates how the Sartrean account of aesthetics also applies to non-representational paintings. The significance of this application lies in the fact that for Sartre, the painting itself (a real, physical object) is never the object of aesthetic appreciation, a point which holds regardless of the artwork's genre. It is usually thought that non-representational works, in virtue of the fact that they lack recognizable content, refer to nothing, and point to nothing besides themselves. By demonstrating that Sartre's account applies to non-representational as well as to representational painting, the essay contests this conviction and argues that non-recognizability in content is not sufficient to show that the object of aesthetic appreciation must be a real, physical object.

Imagination: some preliminary remarks

Imagination, it is often said, is pictorial: to imagine something is to summon a picture. Many find this view problematic, erroneous, or perhaps even incomprehensible. Yet, even if this matter were somehow to be settled, the relationship between imagination and perception remains undetermined. Do imagination (pictorial or not) and perception involve the same kind of experience as a common element? Sartre's account of imagination speaks to both issues. Once I explicate the reasons why he rejects a

pictorial account, I will then show how the structure of imagination is, according to Sartre, unlike that of perception.

In regards to the issue with which we opened this section, Sartre is clear. No pictures reside *in* consciousness, and consciousness is no reservoir of copies or imitations of reality (IPPI: 4–7, 15). When one imagines Pierre, for instance, it is not that one has a 'portrait of Pierre in consciousness' (IPPI: 6); nor is it the case that the object of one's consciousness is this portrait. Rather, to imagine Pierre is to have Pierre – 'the man of flesh and blood' – as the object of one's consciousness (ibid.). Whereas the pictorial account of imagination maintains that when one imagines, the imagined object is reached only indirectly, only due to its resemblance to the summoned picture, Sartre's account holds that 'Pierre is directly reached' (IPPI: 7). What we imagine, Sartre argues, is not a picture but an object. The object appears *as imagined*, and not as the image of something.

Sartre, of course, is not oblivious to the force and appeal of the pictorial account. He is aware both of its unparalleled philosophical backing, and of the fact that this account has become one with 'common sense' (IPPI: 6). Yet despite its pervasiveness, both in the philosophical and everyday realm, Sartre contends that this view ought to be rejected: it is, he deems, the by-product of a fundamental misunderstanding, an illusion in regards to the workings of our minds. Here an interpretative difficulty arises: since the pictorial account comes in many guises, one must conjecture about the exact nature of the account which Sartre is rejecting. Although this task is not one of pure speculation – for one can work backwards and extrapolate from Sartre's objections to the nature of the position criticized – some ambiguities are bound to remain. Minimally, however, the pictorial account must commit to the following three theses: first, mental images or pictures are individual entities; second, these pictures, just like physical portraits, need to be the objects of awareness – if not visual, then mental or inner awareness; third, only inner pictures are the objects of direct and unmediated awareness, external or transcendent objects are not.

Sartre considers and rejects all three theses. The individuality of mental images runs counter both to the 'synthetic structure' and to the transparency of consciousness (ibid.); the assumption that mental images are analogous to pictures or portraits is unjustified, for it assumes and does not demonstrate that 'the world of the mind' is constituted by 'objects very similar to those of the external world' (ibid.); and, finally, the employment of mental images fails to explain the imaginative relation that holds between the object imagined and the object depicted by the corresponding mental image. This final point deserves more attention, for, among other things, it allows us to gain insight into Sartre's account of imagination.

The pictorial account holds that mental pictures are the only objects of direct awareness. Thus, imagination is awareness of pictures and not of objects. Yet, if this is so, it is hard to see how the pictorial account can

explain the relationship between the immanent portrait and the transcendent object. To hold, as the pictorial account does, that this relation is established because the picture resembles the object imagined, is deeply unsatisfactory. If nothing else, resemblance is not sufficient for reference (IPPI: 22, 25; see also Goodman 1976; Walton 1990). But how does Sartre circumvent this difficulty? He does so in a twofold manner: he first posits that imagination is always intentional; and, second, he maintains that intentionality, by its very nature, mandates an indissoluble relationship between consciousness and the transcendent object at which consciousness aims.

Taking our bearings from the intentional structure of consciousness, we quickly come to see that an imagined object, a chair, for example, cannot be *in* consciousness, '[n]ot even as an image' (IPPI: 7). Intentionality prohibits this from being the case: 'It is not a matter of an imitation chair that suddenly entered into consciousness and has only an "extrinsic" relation to the existing chair; it is a matter of a certain type of consciousness' (ibid.). An image, Sartre insists, is nothing but a relation. It is the relation of consciousness to its intentional object. The expression 'mental image' is thus interchangeable with 'imaging or imagining consciousness' and not with the expression 'immanent portrait'. Consequently, imagination is 'a certain way in which consciousness presents to itself an object' (ibid.). The imagining consciousness of Pierre, for instance, is not the consciousness of an image of Pierre. It is Pierre himself who one imagines. That is to say, when one imagines, one is attentive to a man and not to a picture. Properly understood then, a mental image is no picture. It is rather a relation to something wholly transcendent.

Imagination, for Sartre, is not pictorial. Yet, it is not akin to perceptual (non-pictorial) experience either. '[T]he image and the perception', he writes, 'far from being two elementary psychic factors of similar quality that simply enter into different combinations, represent the two great irreducible attitudes of consciousness' (IPPI: 120). The two, in fact, 'exclude one another', for where imagination is, perception is not (ibid.; see also 13–15, 126, 180–6; B&N: 282).

The distinguishing mark of imagination is this: in imagination, consciousness is always directed towards what is absent. In perception, by contrast, consciousness is directed towards what is present. This difference is telling, for it makes manifest that the nature of the object-as-perceived is heterogeneous with that of the object-as-imagined: whereas the former is real, the latter is irreal; and, whereas the former is always situated in relation to other perceived objects, the latter is not, for it inhabits an irreal context. The difference between the two is one in kind and not in degree: one is present and real; the other is absent and irreal (IPPI: 180, 125–36).

This absence which marks the object-as-imagined reflects an essential characteristic of imagination. The object-as-imagined stands in opposition to what is real: it exists only insofar as it denies the material world. An act

of imagination can take different forms, but essentially it is always marked by negation (IPPI: 12, 181ff.). The irreal 'must always be constituted on the ground of the world that it denies' (IPPI: 186). Imagining consciousness, then, is at once annihilating and constituting: it denies the real and posits the irreal. Thus, to repeat what was earlier stated but left unjustified, imagination and perception exclude one another. To imagine Pierre means that we do not perceive Pierre.

But care must be taken here. We must not conflate the irreal character of the object-as-imagined with the real object at which the imagining consciousness aims. To say that the imagining consciousness presents us with a form of nothingness is not to refute the intentional character of imagination. The imagining consciousness is indeed consciousness of something. Just like perception, its intentional correlate is a real object. Unlike perception, however, 'the object as imagined is an irreality', for imagining consciousness makes present that which is absent (IPPI: 125; see also 18). Consider what goes on when one imagines Pierre. One's attention is directed at Pierre and not at a picture or representation of Pierre. The imagining consciousness aims at the real Pierre, the one 'who really lives in this real room in Paris' (IPPI: 126; see also 7, 18, 21, 125). Yet, Pierre-as-imagined is irreal, since 'in so far as he appears to me as imaged [he] … appears to me as absent' (IPPI: 180; see also 13, 24, 126).

The comparison between perception and imagination yields two further findings. First, the object-as-imagined is made manifest always as a creation: the image is the result of an act of spontaneity. Thus, unlike perception, imagination is always self-determining. It is for this reason that Sartre insists that imagination should not be understood as a secondary or derivative mode of consciousness. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that imagination is a 'transcendental condition of consciousness' (IPPI: 188). The ability to deny the object of perception and to posit in its place an irreality belongs to the essence of consciousness. To deny the object of perception is not to cease to be conscious; rather, it is to posit an irreality which arises out of its negation. This denial, Sartre writes, is constitutive of our freedom; it is essential to who we are. To be free or, what amounts to the same thing, to be a consciousness, is to be able to imagine.

One last characteristic of imagination must be mentioned. In contrast to perceptual observation, imagination is only 'quasi-observation' (IPPI: 10). That is, it is 'an observation that does not teach anything' (ibid.). We can never discover something new in imagination. 'An image', Sartre writes, 'is not learned', but instead, it is 'given whole, for what it is, in its appearance' (IPPI: 9). Contrary to the infinity of profiles that one discovers in a perceptual object, in imagination 'there is a kind of essential poverty' (ibid.; see also 10–11, 57, 84, 140). Imagination, unlike perception, cannot be a source of knowledge. We find in it only that which we have already placed there. Knowledge is a constitutive element of the irreal object: the irreal object is

born out of that of which we are already aware. To repeat what we have learned so far: imagination is a conscious and spontaneous act by which the imagining subject quasi-observes an irreal object. With this in mind, we can now turn to Sartre's analysis of the work of art.

The object of aesthetic appreciation

The problem of the work of art, Sartre tells us, 'is strictly dependent on the question of the Imaginary' (IPPI: 188). With this, Sartre declares that it is imagination, and not perception, that reveals to us the object of aesthetic appreciation. The aesthetic object escapes realizing or perceptual consciousness. '[I]t cannot be given to perception', for it differs in kind from the objects of perception (IPPI: 189). Thus, in the case of painting, the painted canvas cannot be the aesthetic object. The canvas is a real object, where the object of aesthetic appreciation is not. But if the canvas is not itself the aesthetic object, then what is its function? According to Sartre, the canvas only has an 'intermediary' role (IPPI: 23). It serves as matter for the imagining consciousness, or, equivalently, as an analogon which enables an 'irreality [the aesthetic object] to be manifested' (IPPI: 189; see also 21).

The canvas exists in the physical world: it is often found in museums, hung on walls, transported from place to place, and occasionally vandalized or burnt. Yet, the canvas is not simply another physical object. It has been intentionally created or painted so as to allow, or even instigate, the awareness of an image. The aim of a painter, according to Sartre, is 'to construct a whole of *real* tones [a material analogon] that would enable [an] irreality to be manifested' (IPPI: 189). A portrait, for instance, acts as an 'invitation', not to perceive the portrait as a real thing, but rather, and through it, to direct our attention at the depicted person (IPPI: 22). '[T]he portrait [of Pierre]', Sartre writes, 'has a tendency to give itself as Pierre in person. The portrait acts upon us – almost – like Pierre in person' (ibid.). Note Sartre's qualification: it is *almost* as if Pierre is there in person. As with any object that appears as imagined, Pierre-as-imagined is an irreality and thus, appears to us as absent. Accordingly, the portrait of Pierre 'is nothing but a way for Pierre to appear to me as absent' (IPPI: 24). The portrait gives us Pierre, although Pierre is not here.

The real elements of any work of art – that is, its physical substratum: the canvas, the sculpture, the installation, etc. – are not themselves the appearing image. The work of art *qua* an object of perception appears to us, for instance, as rectangular, solid, viscous, or coloured. If the work of art appears as the portrait *of* Charles VIII, a depiction *of* haystacks, or the sculpture *of* Venus, it is only because the work of art has ceased to be a perceptual object. It 'is no longer a concrete object that provides me with perception', but instead a physical substratum which stands as the animated matter of an imagining consciousness (IPPI: 21; see also 50). In the case of

the portrait of Charles VIII, when one confronts it, one ceases to be aware of the canvas (or better, the wood) and paint. Instead, through an act of imagining, one becomes aware of a human being. But as mentioned before, this does not mean that one is presented with Charles VIII in the flesh. Charles VIII bestows meaning to our imagining attitude: he is the object of our imagining consciousness. Yet, Charles VIII – the man and king – is not present, but only meant. What appears is an irreality, or, to be more precise, Charles-VIII-as-imaged. As Sartre puts it, 'the dead Charles VIII is there, present before us … and yet we posit him as not being there: we have only reached him "as imaged", "by the intermediary" of the picture' (IPPI: 23).

Hence, phenomenology reveals that our aesthetic experience involves as many as three distinct objects: the physical or real object (for instance, the canvas); the object or subject depicted by the painting (a man, unicorn, field, etc.); and, finally, the irreal object (man-as-imagined, unicorn-as-imagined, etc.). The real object serves as the matter for the animating imagining consciousness or, in Sartre's words, as 'an analogon for the manifestation of the imaged object' (IPPI: 183). The depicted subject or object is the intentional correlate of the imagining consciousness, and it is that which makes a work of art *of* or *about* something. Finally, the irreal object, the imaged or imagined object, is the object of aesthetic appreciation.

The nature of the aesthetic object is thus peculiar: although it depends both on the material analogon and on the depicted object, it is reducible to neither. Furthermore, the aesthetic object appears only when 'consciousness, effecting a radical conversion that requires the nihilation of the world, constitutes itself as imaging' (IPPI: 184). Therefore, the appreciation of the work of art not only requires the distinction between its real and irreal parts, but also the negation or concealment of the real. Yet, this does not rob the materiality of the work of art of its significance. On the one hand, Sartre aligns himself with the commonsensical view that the materiality of a painting, for instance, is precisely that which makes it possible for us to imagine the content of a painting. On the other hand however, and as his discussion of the analogon reveals, the painting is not, as other accounts perhaps would have it, a passive physical object, awaiting to be animated by an imagining consciousness. Although the real elements of a painting are neutral, insofar as they 'can enter into a synthesis of imagination or of perception', they are '*expressive*' (IPPI: 22). It is Sartre's contention then that the matter of the painting solicits the spectator to animate it in order to 'make a *representation* of an absent or nonexistent object', that is, to make present, always as imagined, the depicted object (IPPI: 50). For example, a painting which has been intentionally 'made to resemble a human being, acts on me', says Sartre, 'as would a man' (IPPI: 22). It 'directly moves me', or it 'solicits me gently to take him as a man' (ibid.). The neutrality of the physical matter, therefore, does not mean indifference. 'Spontaneity of consciousness', Sartre writes, 'is strongly solicited' (IPPI: 50).

In light of the aforementioned discussion, one is tempted to interpret the relationship between the real and the irreal – or even between the realizing and the imagining consciousness – as that of cause and effect. That is to say, what effectuates the imagining consciousness, and as a consequence what brings into existence the aesthetic object, is the resemblance between the depiction and the object depicted. But Sartre's analysis precludes this possibility (IPPI: 21–2). Resemblance, he insists, cannot be the *cause* of an imagining consciousness, for it 'is not a force that tends to evoke [a] mental image' (IPPI: 22). He explains:

> Between two consciousnesses, the relation of cause and effect cannot hold. A consciousness is a synthesis through and through, thoroughly intimate with itself: it is at the heart of this synthetic interiority that it can join, by an act of retention or protention, with a preceding or succeeding consciousness. Moreover, for one consciousness to act on another consciousness, it must be retained and recreated by the consciousness on which it is to act … One consciousness is not the cause of another consciousness: it motivates it.
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> (IPPI: 25–6)

Thus, the relationship between the perceptual and the realizing consciousness is not one of causation, but one of motivation. Strictly speaking then, the perception of the painting does not *cause* the spectator to imagine an object. Rather, once the spectator encounters the painting in the right way, she is motivated to take up an imagining attitude. Or alternatively, the appropriate experience of the work of art should, according to the structure of the imagination *and* of temporality (note Sartre's mention of retention and protention in the above citation), lead to an imagining experience, one in which something that is absent is made present.

The description of our aesthetic experience includes then the clause of encountering or confronting the work of art *in the right way*. But to what does this qualification amount? First, it should be obvious that the clause entails more than the requirement that the conditions of the environment should be such as to allow the (preferably, veridical) perception of the painting. It is undeniable that the work of art can function as an analogon, as matter for the imagining consciousness, only if one is aware of its presence. A painting in the dark solicits, instigates, or motivates no imagining consciousness. Rather, such conditions concern only the materiality of the work of art and not its irreality. As Sartre points out, to direct a spotlight on a painting is only to illuminate the canvas and not the object of aesthetic appreciation. It is, in other words, to light a piece of coloured material and not the '*cheek* of Charles VIII' (IPPI: 183). Yet, in addition to certain real conditions that need to be in place, the spectator must also have

certain knowledge or at least certain beliefs about the content of the painting. If one does not know that the portrait of Charles VIII is a depiction of Charles VIII – the king of France and member of the House of Valois – one would then imagine only a man, and not the son of Louis XI who was responsible for invading Italy in 1494. Imagination, as stated above, is quasi-observation and consequently, it 'could not exist without a piece of knowledge that constitutes it' (IPPI: 57).

This is not to say, however, that the imagining synthesis which makes present the aesthetic object is only an intellectual matter – a matter of what we believe or know. One finds in imagination, in addition to beliefs, certain affectivity or feelings. Beliefs and feelings, in fact, constitute two moments and not two parts of the imagining structure (IPPI: 72, 92, 140; see also STE: 49). The imagining experience, in other words, comes with an emotional texture: the picture of a loved one provokes, for instance, a feeling of desire, and if the viewer is motivated to imagine the loved one, the irreality will be marked by this desire. The loved one as imagined appears as desirable. The same occurs, *mutatis mutandis*, for a painting, or a work of art in general.

Is this emotional texture already present in the analogon, or is it the result of an imagining consciousness? Sartre wants to have it both ways. First, if feelings are indeed constitutive of the aesthetic object, then the manner in which the analogon is constructed must be such that it immediately – namely, without the intervention of imagination – stimulates feelings and affective responses. Only in this way can feelings be constitutive of the imagining consciousness. Sartre concurs. Feelings 'are given with the analogon' and hence, to encounter the analogon is already to be aware of it as affecting (IPPI: 137). Feelings, he further notes, are 'so deeply incorporated with the perceived object that it is impossible to distinguish between what is felt and what is perceived' (IPPI: 139). Thus, part of what it is to be an analogon is to stimulate affective responses, and through these responses to motivate the spectator to effectuate an imagining synthesis. The forms and colours of a portrait of Pierre, for instance, are 'strongly organized' such that they 'almost impose themselves as an image of Pierre' (IPPI: 50). And the image of Pierre is one which already gives us Pierre as lovable, calming, or friendly. Or, consider what Sartre writes when he describes the aesthetic experience of looking at the portrait of Charles VIII: the 'sinuous and sensual lips, that narrow, stubborn forehead, *directly provoke* in me a certain affective impression' (IPPI: 23; emphasis mine). The canvas provokes affective impressions in the spectator, and it does so directly or immediately (see Kandinsky 1977 for strikingly similar claims). As soon as one looks at the portrait, one is already affected. Charles VIII 'is painted with intelligence, with power, with grace' (IPPI: 189). Thus, there is something in the way Charles VIII is depicted – not only the colours, shapes, or forms, but also the texture of the paint – that allows the spectator to imagine much

more than the way Charles VIII looked. The affective impressions also allow the spectator to imagine the type of person he was: hateful, powerful, autarchic, despicable, etc.

But as Sartre writes, we should not fail to see that 'we are capable of a second-order reaction, love, hatred, admiration, etc., of the irreal object that we have constituted' (IPPI: 137). The order of dependence is bidirectional: not only do our feelings influence the irreal content, but also the irreal content may influence us, insofar as we are capable of reacting to it. Hence, the presence of the irreal object is not passive. It makes a difference to the imagining subject. Sartre writes: 'imaging feelings are violent and develop with force. In that case, they are not exhausted in constituting the object, they envelop it, dominate it and carry it along' (IPPI: 138). The feeling of disgust, for instance, might undergo 'a significant modification while passing through the imaging state': it might become 'concentrated', 'more precise', and more intense, to the extent that it can bring about nausea and even vomiting (IPPI: 139). Note that it brings about, but does not *cause* nausea. The two must be kept separate, for conduct in the face of the irreal is *sui generis* and hence entirely distinct from conduct in the face of the real. Sartre is adamant about this: the irreal object can never be a cause, but only an effect. The irreal object lacks any force and thus, 'does not act' (IPPI: 138). Whereas, for example, disgust in the face of the real is provoked by an object, disgust in the face of the irreal is not due to an object. Nausea and vomiting are not the effects of a repugnant irreal object. They are rather, the 'consequences of the free development of the imaging feeling' (IPPI: 138). This possibility of reacting to the already constituted irreality endows the aesthetic object with a second life. True, the way the analogon is constructed stimulates affective responses. This, however, sketches only an incomplete picture. We are also capable of reacting to the irreal object which was in part constituted by the affective responses stimulated by the analogon. In this way, we may bring forth additional responses: ones which could not be foreseen by the artist, but are nonetheless ultimately due to her creation.

Irreality and affectivity in Rothko

To conclude our examination here would run the risk of misleading ourselves, for, hitherto, the essay focused exclusively on works of representational art. To stop at this point would first suggest that resemblance is necessary – if not as a cause, at least as a motivation – for both the imagining consciousness and the aesthetic object; and, second, it would fail to take stock of the central role of affectivity in imagination. In a word, a failure to consider works that are abstract or non-representational would be unjust both to art and to Sartre.[1] In this section, I aim to rectify this. By using the late works of Mark Rothko as an example, I will show

how the Sartrean account of imagination also applies to works of non-representational art. In so doing, I will contest an understanding of non-representational art which maintains that the object of aesthetic appreciation cannot be an irreal object, but must be a real, physical object: the canvas itself.

The late works of Rothko cannot be mistaken. Typically they are described as being 'composed of luminous, soft edged rectangles arranged horizontally on large canvases' (Clearwater 2007: 6). These paintings are the culmination of an artistic path that, prior to reaching a state of pure abstraction, gave birth to expressionistic representational paintings (1920s and 1930s), mythologically inspired paintings (early 1940s), and finally surreal abstractions (end of 1940s). Rothko's later works lack figures, representational content, and images. When we look at these paintings, we see patches and areas of colours, perhaps even coloured columns, but no temples, peasants, objects, faces, or landscapes. One may then object that if a painting by Rothko is a work of art, it is not because the painting functions as an analogon to an irreal content. There is nothing recognizable that motivates our imagination to make present an absent, transcendent object. The work of art, instead, is entirely consumed by, or given in, perception. Thus, contra to the Sartrean analysis, an appreciation of a painting by Rothko does not require an imagining intervention.

This interpretative stance towards the works of Rothko and, at the same time, objection to Sartre's account, embodies the following line of reasoning: if non-representational paintings such as Rothko's lack recognizable content, and recognizable content is a precondition for the spectator to effectuate an imaginative synthesis, then non-representational paintings do not stand as matter that can be animated by an imagining consciousness. Consequently, we are faced with a choice: we can either dogmatically denounce all non-representational paintings as works of art; or, more prudently, we can maintain that imagination does not reveal to us, at least in non-representational works, the object of aesthetic appreciation.

The objection I wish to consider takes the latter path. It declares that the object of aesthetic appreciation is the canvas and not an irreal object which appears once we take up the imagining attitude. Such an outlook, however, relies upon at least three assumptions. The first two are present in the assertion that Rothko's paintings are examples of non-representational art. Rothko's later works are non-representational, this view holds, insofar as they include no recognizable content and insofar as the lack of such content is a sufficient condition for being a non-representational work of art. These assumptions are not without support. They enjoy the backing of many art critics and theorists who both affirm the absence of figures or any recognizable content in the later paintings of Rothko, and who categorize his works as abstract or non-representational (see, for instance, Rothko's interview with Seitz in Rothko and López-Remiro 2006: 75–9; for an

exception, however, see Rosenblum 1975: 214). I shall take no issue with these two assumptions. They lie beyond the jurisdiction of this essay. I do, nonetheless, wish to contest a third assumption, one which is often taken to be a corollary of the first two. The assumption can be stated as follows: non-recognizability in content dictates that the object of aesthetic appreciation is a perceptual object. As a consequence, non-recognizability excludes an irreal content and rules imagination to be superfluous. What is expressed in this assumption is the view that works of non-representational art refer and point to nothing beyond themselves, and this feature is enough to preclude an imagining attitude.

Sartre's account, however, rejects this third assumption. The lack of recognizable content is not tantamount to the lack of an irreality. This is not because representation plays no role in art, but rather because the aesthetic object is an irreality born out of the beliefs *and* feelings of the imagining subject. In the case of works of art which are non-representational, it is the latter that take precedence. When the analogon no longer carries the force of resemblance, affectivity is the primary constitutive element of the aesthetic object. When knowledge fails to 'fill the gaps in intuition', affectivity takes control: it 'substitute[s] itself for the intuitive elements peculiar to perception in order to realize the object as imaged' (IPPI: 51, 29; see also 89). Affectivity, thus, does not require representation, and Sartre expresses this quite clearly. 'We are inclined at first to exaggerate the primacy of the representative', he writes. 'One affirms that there must always be a representation to provoke the feeling. Nothing is more false' (IPPI: 70).

Recall that the analogon is immediately affective. There is an affective reaction which needs no mediation, intellectual or imaginative. In the same way that in perception lines are not given to us first 'as lines pure and simple' and only afterwards, 'in the imaged attitude', become elements of representation, the same goes for affectivity (IPPI: 35). The analogon is 'entirely suffused by our affectivity' (IPPI: 141). Shapes, lines, or colours are given to us already 'with this or that affective quality' (ibid.). 'All perception', Sartre writes – and not only the perception of a familiar or recognizable content – 'is accompanied by an affective reaction' (IPPI: 28).

As soon as we realize that affectivity needs no representative content, the interpretative suggestion with which we began this section can be challenged. The painting can always stand as animated matter for an imagining consciousness. Non-representational content neither precludes affectivity, nor prohibits the emergence of irreality. Regardless of what the analogon depicts – or better, regardless of what it fails to depict – it can serve as the animating matter for an imagining consciousness. As Sartre puts it, '[w]hat motivates the appearance of the irreal is not necessarily, nor even most often, *the representative* intuition of the world from this or that point of view. … [T]he surpassing [of the real] can and should be made at first by affectivity, or action' (IPPI: 185; see also 67).

Note that here, in addition to affectivity, Sartre adds action to the ways by which one can surpass the real. What Sartre means by action is awareness of action or, better, awareness of movement. As such, this addition does not oppose his own principle that the constitutive elements of irreality are knowledge and affectivity. This awareness of bodily movements, which 'can play the role of an analogon for imaging consciousness', is posited as the explanation for a number of phenomena that could not be accounted for either by the affective responses of the subject or by her beliefs (IPPI: 80). Sartre writes: 'This explains why we read so many things in an image whose matter is so poor. Actually, our knowledge is not directly realized on the lines that, by themselves, do not speak: it is realized via the movements' (IPPI: 34). The reason why the role of eye movements tends to be overlooked is because 'visual impressions prevail over the vague and feeble kinaesthetic impressions' (IPPI: 77). However, in pictures which are not perfect depictions, or on surfaces which have not been intentionally designed to depict something, the analogon is constituted by the spectator's awareness of her eye movements. Although one can extend this account to include works of non-representational art – 'action painting' being the obvious candidate – I will refrain from doing so. This extended application faces an obvious objection that demands an answer: the Sartrean account must show that subjects are in fact conscious of their eye movements when perceiving, for example, a Pollock. But most of the time, we are unaware of, and have no (conscious) control over, our eye movements. Be that as it may, the point of this section should be clear: even if a painting lacks representational content, its real elements can still be surpassed – if not by action or knowledge, then by affectivity.

To return to the paintings of Rothko, we need not discover in them figures that resemble objects already found in the world in order to take up an imagining attitude. Simply by perceiving his abstract forms, we are motivated to imagine; if not kings, goddesses, or fields, then objects with indeterminate visual properties but with specific emotional textures. Both imagination and feelings are, according to Sartre, intentional. Hence, if the affective character of a Rothko motivates us to take up the imagining attitude, then what is imagined must be an object beyond the canvas. Imagination always aims at a transcendent object, and if this does not appear in the imagining attitude as a person or a landscape, it will appear *as* something upsetting or calming, *as* something familiar or frightening, *as* something oppressive or liberating. In *No.10* (1950), for instance, the massive yellow coloured area, its position in the canvas, and the contrast between it and the coloured areas beneath it, can strike the spectator as unsettling, distressing, or irksome. One can then be motivated to imagine an unsettling, distressing, or irksome object, which, in virtue of our ability to react to an irreality, can further upset one or put one on edge. On the contrary, in *Untitled (Black on Gray)* (1969/70), not only are the colours much darker,

but also the two areas are much closer in colour. This painting can invoke a sense of fatality or serenity, a feeling of fear or tranquillity.

The extent to which a Rothko can emotionally affect the viewer is documented in the visitor's book at the Rothko Chapel, which is replete with entries reporting the ways in which visitors were emotionally moved and, in some cases, even brought to tears by the paintings (for a related discussion, see Elkins 2001). Such descriptions of our aesthetic experience show that the perception of abstract forms, by being affective, gives rise to imagined objects – objects which can, through a second-order reaction, affect us even further. In other words, the painting which envelops the viewer, invokes both images and emotions.[2]

Conclusion: signification in non-representational painting

I will conclude by raising an interpretative suggestion, inspired by Sartre's account, in regards to non-representational painting. The demarcation of non-representational from representational paintings is frequently, but not always, based on the following criterion: non-representational works of art refer or point to nothing beyond themselves. Failure to refer and signify is thus the distinguishing mark of non-representational painting. Consider the following passages, which are indicative of this view:

> When we consider what makes abstract painting different from representational painting, it is clear that abstract painting, precisely by virtue of being non-representational, is exclusively a matter of the placement of paint on a surface. It is abstract precisely because there is no content, it points to nothing beyond or outside itself.
>
> (Jacquette 2006: 56–7)

> Any work of abstract expressionism will suffice to illustrate painting containing only immanent values of expression … The abstraction means nothing; the portrait 'means' its subject. What is the ideal entity defining the abstract expressionist painting, which exists only in one copy which refers to nothing beyond itself? Only a theoretician deluded by his own theory will find one.
>
> (Kaelin 1982: 84; compare Wollheim 1987: Ch. 2; Goodman 1978: Ch. 4)

It seems premature, to say the least, to talk of theoretical delusions. How obvious is it that recognizable content is a precondition for reference to a transcendent object? Or better, according to which theory of aesthetic appreciation is non-recognizability in content one and the same with the fact that an abstract creation means or refers to nothing? There are places where Sartre speaks *as if* he shares this view. A non-representational

painting, he writes, 'need not *represent* or *imitate* the real', and it can be 'altogether devoid of signification' (IPPI: 190). The same sentiment is repeated elsewhere: Calder's mobiles, he writes, 'signify nothing, refer to nothing other than themselves' (CM: 355). Yet Sartre insists that it would be a 'grave error' to conclude that the work of art is a real object (IPPI: 190). Representational or not, 'painting', Sartre tells us, 'still functions as an *analogon*' (ibid.). But here one feels a tension. How can a painting be devoid of signification and still act as an analogon? Isn't an analogon that which allows consciousness to make present something which is absent?

Sartre's discussion of the differences between a sign and a portrait helps to alleviate the difficulty (IPPI: 21ff.). There, Sartre argues that a portrait is not a sign, since the latter is related to its object only externally. A sign merely points to its object, whereas a portrait makes its object present. A word, for instance, 'awakens a signification, and that signification never returns to it but goes to the thing and drops the word' (IPPI: 23). This, however, does not hold true for a portrait, or, for that matter, for any painting. In the case of a portrait, we continuously observe it, and in so doing our imagining consciousness is 'constantly enriched' (ibid.). 'Intentionality', Sartre writes, 'constantly returns to the image-portrait' (ibid.). Thus, the painting can be devoid of signification, but it is so only in virtue of the fact that it is not a sign: only due to the fact that it does not point to, but rather presents, an object. If this is indeed what Sartre means when he writes that a painting can be 'altogether devoid of signification', then most paintings are devoid of signification (IPPI: 190–1). Regardless of its genre, a painting has been intentionally constructed in such a manner as to motivate us to take up an imagining attitude, and not to direct our perceptual attention to something else. A painting is neither a sign nor an 'identity card' (UP: 552). Instead, it is an instigator of an imagining synthesis.

Consequently, what distinguishes non-representational from representational paintings should not be the fact that only the latter are other-referring. The difference, according to Sartre, lies elsewhere. The distinguishing mark of non-representational painting is that, in contrast to representational painting, it invokes, through the imagination, irreal objects which have never been seen before: 'objects that do not exist *in the painting*, nor anywhere in the world, but that are manifested through the canvas and that have seized it by a kind of possession' (IPPI: 190–1). Here, one should not find recourse to the idea that these new objects are compilations of things already existing in the world, but put together in such a way as to give rise to a new entity. Although such a route might seem tempting, for it is in agreement with Sartre's conviction that imagination is always quasi-observation, conglomerations of existing objects, regardless how novel and creative they are, are unlikely to be the aesthetic objects of non-representational art. As highlighted above, it is affectivity and not knowledge (or belief) which primarily constitutes the aesthetic object in

works of non-representational art. As such, there seems to be no difficulty in accepting that a Rothko – or in fact, any non-representational painting – motivates us to give rise to a novel irreal object: an object, which unlike a physical object, has no specific visual determinations, but nonetheless possesses a specific emotional texture. Or, what amounts to the same thing, a Rothko motivates us to give rise to an object which, as Sartre requires, resides neither in the painting nor anywhere in the world.[3]

Notes

1 For present purposes, the terms 'non-representational' and 'abstract' are treated as synonymous. Abstract works of art are taken to be works which are not mimetic representations of reality, and their aesthetic value is not (at least, not solely) a function of their representational ability.

2 Incidentally, the view that the canvas is not merely a perceptual object is also shared by Rothko. 'The most interesting painting is one that expresses more of what one thinks than of what one sees' (cited in Breslin 1998: 261). Or consider what he says when he describes his own intentions as an artist: 'I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotion – tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on…. And if you, as you say, are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point' (cited in Clearwater 2007: 114). For a more detailed description of Rothko's self-interpretation, see Rothko 2004; Rothko and López-Reniro 2006.

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